DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 087 043 CS 201 059

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TITLE Environments for English Learning.
PUB DATE Nov 73
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (63rd, Philadelphia, November 22-24, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Alternative Schools; Conventional Instruction; Curriculum Development; Educational Improvement; Elective Subjects; *English Curriculum; *English Instruction; Learning; Learning Activities; *Learning Motivation; Open Education; Open Plan Schools; *Secondary Education; Student Centered Curriculum; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The various physical environments for the teaching of English include the traditional classroom, the physically open school, schools without walls, and free or alternative schools. Curriculum and organizational strategies include the traditional English curriculum, teacher assignments, grouping, and elective programs. English teachers have a responsibility to understand the total environment--physical, curricular, and organizational--in which they teach and in which young people learn. English teachers should also have a voice in planning new buildings and facilities or renovations of old ones, in developing and introducing curriculum innovations, such as elective programs, and in developing or supporting new options in school organization. (LL)

ED 087043

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ENVIRONMENTS FOR ENGLISH LEARNING

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(At the Cincinnati conference on Secondary English Curriculum, reference was made by one speaker to some negative aspects of alternative programs in high schools today. I asked Dr. Fagan whether it might be a good idea to offer some positive impressions of such programs, as well as of elective programs and new physical environments for learning English. As a response, he has invited me to summarize a point of view about the environment for English learnings today and in the immediate future.)

In an article in the English Journal for November 1970 ("English Teaching: Past, Present, and Future") I balanced off the English teaching I had learned against the teaching that has emerged from a changing society, a changing demand on the schools, and the new needs of an adolescent role that has changed socially, morally, and legally. The winds of change, of course, reach different communities and schools at different times, and their impact is varied according to the community. But the changes exist; they will not go away; and the wise teacher will adopt a role of reasoned but humane leadership in meeting them.

A close reading of the article referred to will reveal me as a traditionalist in terms of teaching the motivated individual who wants to follow the traditional academic route through a liberal arts education or who has a real interest in language and in developing a craft in writing. The methods I learned I still judge to be best in these circumstances. But today's world requires different options for young people with different needs, different goals, different life styles. Here I break from tradition. The egg-crate classroom with fixed seats, the English I-II-III-IV lockstep

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curriculum based on the same textbooks for all students in the same grade, the custodial environment with every student's physical presence controlled every minute of the established school day just will not do today. Our age places emphasis on providing a humane environment for living, work, and study; on meeting the needs of the individual; and on recognizing the individual's right to live and to assume major responsibility for his actions at an earlier age (18 years) than heretofore. It is now in fact the high school rather than the college that bears a major responsibility for supporting the young person in his transition from adolescence to adulthood.

The physical environment, then, to consider this first, is one that needs a kind of definition and planning in which English teachers have not customarily been involved. Too frequently school planners come up with ideas like the physically open school. which theoretically costs less to build and maintain because it has few interior walls, without involving teachers in the planning and design and without giving them opportunities to develop techniques and matériel that are best suited to such an environment. We need more resources such as those that were prepared by the NCTE Committee on English Learning Environments to educate teachers and department heads about various possibilities.

There are, of course, interesting potentials in the availability of open space within the building. Theoretically, one large open space provides greater flexibility than several small enclosed spaces. Small discussion groups can be quickly reassembled into larger groups to hear a speaker, to see a playlet or a film, or to take a test; or vice versa. The very absence of solid walls lends a sense of freedom and openness to the learning process.

But there are situations in which complete openness constitutes a source of distraction. If the walls, ceiling, and floor are not adequately treated acoustically, and if each group is allotted only a limited floor space, it can be almost impossible to conduct an in-group discussion or to carry on any "quiet" kind of learning activity, such as reading, writing, or taking a quiz. The teacher who uses a tape, a record, a film strip, or a moving picture creates a real disturbance. The operation of a reading, writing, or speech laboratory is impossible.

And beyond these practical considerations are others. The teacher who has spent his life in an enclosed classroom has developed techniques and attitudes suited to that environment. It may be almost impossible for him to adapt the group relationship he is accustomed to work with to a "public" situation. He may feel sensitive about bothering other groups, and a subconscious inhibition may negatively modify a positive and exuberant teaching style.

Increasingly an English student today needs more than a room or a part of a large indoor space for English learnings. He may do a research project that takes him into the community and into libraries and museums and factories in neighboring communities. He needs a place to assemble his materials and to write. He needs a place to confer with his teacher, or to work with other students on a group project. He needs assistance and materials for producing tapes or pictures or even moving picture film. He needs a place where he can listen to or view media materials. In other words, he needs many specialized and many generalized spaces in his English learning environment. Teachers of theatre, speech, journalism, and "practical English" will build their own additional specialized lists. And all will refer over and over to the need for a central, well staffed, and well supplied library or media center.

The English teacher, then, - and probably the student, too - should be represented in planning a new building or in remodeling an old, in order to ensure certain things. In today's world, there should indeed be openness; but it should be openness for the greatest possible amount of flexibility, so that the needs of insulated class areas can be accommodated along with those of the completely open; so that specialized areas can be provided for certain activities; so that an adequate media center will provide many resources and spaces, and well-trained personnel; and so that teacher and student have adequate working and living spaces.

A series of boxes - heated in northern climes and sometimes cooled in southern - containing a number of desks and chairs for students, confronted by a desk and chair for the teacher, connected by corridors, with a room of books and periodicals, is no longer - if it ever was - an adequate physical environment for English teaching and learning. The school building it self must be a pleasant and humane structure - pleasant to be in, with elbow room, and climatic, visual, and acoustic treatment to complete an environment for living and learning at all seasons. It must provide all the resources needed as students learn English in new ways - or newly structured ways - for the new world in which they will live.

These comments about the physical environment are closely related to the points I should like to make next about curriculum and then about the organization and programs in a school. Although a discussion of curriculum usually concerns content, there are aspects that overlap organization and program to some extent. For instance, laws concerning the length of the school day may dictate the amount of content to be covered; and legal requirements may dictate the <u>what</u> in content. Under the law in my

native Massachusetts the State Board of Education still requires a five-and-a-half-hour school day and a minimal 180-day school year, which contains implications for the amount of time to be devoted to certain aspects of what we call English. Yet, interestingly enough, we can find no specific legal requirement that English be taught every one of the four years in high school. Local school committee rulings under the assumptions of C.E.E.B recommendations seem to have created a de facto situation in regard to requiring English every year. Both law and custom, in other words, have dictated the number of years and the amount of time each year that must be assigned to presumably productive experiences in learning English.

What are some results in terms of curriculum content? One is that lock-step curricula have been developed over the years to suit a legal-type requirement. In many instances individual differences in interests and even in ability and aptitudes have been forced into the lockstep of required seventh-grade or twelfth-grade English. If the teacher is ingenious, enthusiastic, and full of energy, some of the individual differences have been met; if not, student interest and involvement have been shaped on a procrustean bed, and a succession of bored or indifferent students have progressed from grade to grade. Even the excellent device of textbooks or workbooks, or both; and carefully prepared courses of reading in anthologies have been prostituted to serving as complete grade-level courses of study instead of resources for the teacher to use in meeting the individual needs. And all too frequently administrators and supervisors have found such books to be a convenient means of controlling the lockstep.

Another aspect of organization that has a direct effect on curriculum and instruction is teacher assignment. All too frequently in small schools the specialist in physics, home economics, or physical education is assigned an English class or two to complete his program. Since English is his minor,

it is frequently assumed that he will teach the composition book and anthology - his job is not defined as one of teaching the individual. And in larger schools or school systems, the economics loom as the controlling factor in how many personnel will be hired; hence, a teacher-student ratio or a class size that comes close to prohibiting even the thoroughly qualified English teacher from doing more than keeping order, taking attendance, and following the assigned book. The NCTE has performed a yeoman service here in promulgating the doctrine of not over 100 students in not more than four classes a day.

One administrative attempt to ease the situation, even in terms of large class size, has been to authorize the grouping of students by ability and achievement, the so-called homogeneous grouping. Many teachers feel this has been helpful in grouping students so that at least the basic materials can be chosen for the group with a higher probability that interest can be retained and students work with materials within their scope. This practice, of course, has been frowned upon for non-English and pseudo-pedagogical reasons (a) because it groups the low-ability people and tends to increase their own low self-image, (b) because it creates an elite in the high-level groups, (c) because the best teachers are assigned to the two extremes, leaving the least qualified teachers for the many average students, (d) because middle and lower level students are deprived of the stimulation of the higher-level student, and (e) because the process defeats the democratizing function of the public schools. So what is offered as an administrative device to meet a pedagogical problem is defeated on essentially political grounds. We all suffer from a sense of confusion as to how a democracy can best function for the benefit of the individual and for the benefit of the society. My own observation as a person is that snobbistic tendencies

are an unfortunate aspect of the human condition from above and below; and as a teacher, that children of low potential are hopelessly lost and children of high potential hopelessly bored in a completely heterogeneous grouping. As in all things, there must be some professional and humane judgment in making decisions about matters such as grouping and choosing materials for the group to use.

Creative teachers always have invented ways to rise above or to actually use the rigidities of space and of curriculum. They have unscrewed the desks and rearranged them, put their own desks in the rear, covered bulletin boards with interesting materials, and even gone outdoors with their classes. They have divided English into semesters of literature and semesters of composition - as if the two had nothing in common! - ; divided the year into units of literary genres, themes, or chronology; assigned research papers; invented independent study projects; taken field trips to see plays and films; introduced the audiovisual media to their classrooms.

But just as a different approach to the planning and use of space and facilities for teaching English becomes necessary, so does a different approach to curriculum. Teachers are now saying in effect, "Let's examine what we offer and students expect in English. Let's package the content logically and attractively. Let's invite teachers to teach that in which they are most competent, and, within reasonable bounds of balance, invite students to study what they think they need or are interested in. Let's get away from the curse of being required, and make the requirement attractive. Let's put involvement back in for the teacher, and motivation for the student."

True, this can be carried to an excess. I know schools that offer a smorgasbord of eighty or ninety delectable varieties. The administration boggles at the prospect of scheduling them in quarter or half-year servings - but let them boggle. They are employed to administer the school for the greatest individual advantage of students and utilization of teachers; and the computer, with programs all written to handle situations just like this, is at hand to help them. - Parents and students get confused. Whose fault is that? Didn't the department, with its expertise in communication, involve faculty, students, parents, and community in planning and initiating the new venture? Didn't the department involve the guidance staff, and support their work with specific guidance from this year's English teacher in making selections from next year's smorgasbord? Wasn't a special briefing presented for parents, whether they all came or not, and didn't the department head have a rationale and administrative policies all approved beforehand to answer questions before they became objections? Without these preparations, of course, there will be major difficulties; but with them, - and perhaps thirty or forty offerings - the electives system for English breaks away from the lockstep, replaces heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping with choice grouping according to the student's interest and past achievements, makes content more important to curriculum than time requirements, enables teachers to be used where they can be most effective, and opens the way for specific learning groups to be organized according to the nature of what they are learning together. At which stage, we can move to a discussion of organization and program.

Up to this point we have been considering changes in existing buildings and curriculum. Underlying all the discussion is an implicit recognition, however, that deficiencies had been allowed to accumulate in the

established educational system to a point where modifications - most of them improvements - were required. Here we have been considering changes in only two areas, of course, directly related to the teaching of English. Some people, however, go beyond urging change in the existing structure and insist that the entire nature of schools must change. The result has been a growing wave over the past decade of "free" schools or "alternative" schools. Most of these have been private, and sometimes have been named for their locations, so that we hear of "storefront" schools or "warehouse" schools, sometimes staffed by volunteer teachers. The philosophy has been to offer young people what they want to learn, to place no artificial requirements on them, to help them to a better life, and in general to follow the lead of the student. Such schools are characterized, as outsiders observe them, by permissiveness. Parenthetically, the list of specific rules developed by the student body itself in one such school in Massachusetts is longer than any list of rules I have seen for a public high school - the thrust for liberation from adult supervision can backfire! While I was Commonwealth Fellow with the Massachusetts State Department of Education, I did extensive research concerning such schools, and found references that the average life was about eighteen months.

The fact that such schools have come into existence as a form of <u>protest</u> against the deficiencies of existing schools cannot, however, be ignored. However, radical or far-out some of us may consider such schools, they are a logical extension of the movement to humanize and deinstitutionalize education, to relate it more specifically to the needs of young people in a changing world, and to enable it through many options to meet the needs of all young adults, not just those heading definitely for higher academic education or for

technical and technological training. Many public high schools have extended their lists of elective courses, have provided variations in the length and nature of the school day, have modified or eliminated the study hall system, have relaxed rules concerning use of school facilities, have introduced an open campus system, or have devised programs for including work experiences as a part of school. Sometimes these have been in response to pressures for alternative programs; sometimes they have been the product of forward-looking school people.

Successful alternative schools, or alternative options in established schools, have certain characteristics. Their leadership is committed to them, and generally their faculties are enthusiastic. They have clear policies and sound financial support. They offer the individual a sense of community with his fellows. Whatever rules or projects are agreed on by student and school are followed. Freedom to develop ideas, projects, and life patterns is not confused with merely letting the student follow whims and enthusiasms. In noting these characteristics, it is also important to bear in mind that relatively few students have a nature that finds such an educational option really compatible, for it involves a great deal of self-direction, initiative, ambition, inner strength, responsibility, and commitment for an individual to develop his potential in such an environment. I have a suspicion that free schools that have had a short life did not exhibit the characteristics listed above, were unfortunate in the students who enrolled (or the parents who enrolled them!), and actually did become more permissive than anything else, because few people were clear as to what they were doing.

The most successful alternative programs I have observed have been related to established public institutions, such as public high schools or schools of education. They exist as educational options for students who do not find a purpose in other options available. Students who are just "misfits" do not seem to last in this option better than in others; but many students who were frustrated, unchallenged, unmotivated, purposeless in more traditional options have thrived in this option. They have found a sense of community, an opportunity to follow their own ideas, an availability of experiences with community experts and institutions aside from the school, a close relationship with their teachers as adult friends, and an opportunity to be daily involved in developing the mores of their academic community and the nature of their own continuing education.

The English teacher - or the alternative teacher whose specialty had been English - finds himself dealing with students as individuals following fields of interest related to English. He is looked upon as a resource for writing any paper or report. Frequently several students will want to pursue a common topic, and with the teacher will form a study group or a "class". A student may develop a unique theme for which a local volunteer expert may be the resource, or "teacher", under the general supervision of the alternative teacher. The alternative teacher is responsible for working out a continuing evaluation of what the student is doing, and an assessment of the "credit" to be awarded toward graduation. He is responsible for giving the student support in continuing and completing his projects, and overcoming unforeseen difficulties. He is there to help the student understand failure and how to learn from it if a project does not work out as planned.

Saying all this another way, the English teacher in an alternative program finds himself in a logical progression in terms of utilizing space in terms of learning, and in developing curriculum beyond even the flexibility of an electives program. He comes close to the kind of relationship he might have with a student "reading" under him in an English university. An unusual opportunity for teaching and learning in a close to ideal situation comes into being. But always one must remember that not every teacher can offer the dedication, the learning, or the ability to deal with individuals in groups that an alternative assignment will demand of him; nor can many students at the high school level really benefit. The important point is that the alternative program offers one more needed option in our school organization - a program alternative to the anonymity, the unfortunate rigidity in many aspects of a system that must provide for all the children of all people, and the lack of motivation all too many young people feel.

I do feel that we as English teachers have a responsibility to understand the total environment - physical, curricular, and organizational - in which we teach and in which young people work. More than this, I believe we need to exert leadership based on our understanding, and make sure that we do have a voice in planning new buildings and facilities or renovations of old, in developing and introducing new curricula such as the electives program, and in developing or supporting new options in the school organization as we find our own aptitudes and natures lead us.

HW:et